California craze mixes booze and ooze, the sublime and slime

By LEE GRANT
The Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — The cream-colored Porsche and strawberry daiquiri singles crowd has a new passion: Instead of going to discos to dance, they now go to yell and unwind as they watch female mud wrestlers.

One recent evening at a flashy West Los Angeles club called Chippendale's, Sandy Castaldo, a health care administrator, was seated ringside watching other women wrestle in the mud.

Sipping on a margarita and cheering along with the packed house, Ms. Castaldo was plain having fun. "This is bizarre," she said, "but people should be able to do whatever they want.

"I can see the lure here, why one would want to do this or watch. It's being free, not worrying about getting dirty, extraneous completely from everyday life, something different."

Steven Skromeda, who works days in the gold and silver trading market, arrives Thursday nights at Osko's in West Hollywood to perch close to the action and observe a different set of women roll around in the mud.

"I have a great time," he said. "I mean seeing real beautiful girls get down in the dirt. I can unwind, scream and holler. It's not degrading to women. Everyone's simply enjoying it."

Southern California disco clubs from Ventura County south to San Diego County are discovering a business bonanza in female mud wrestling. It has been a cure, at least for now, to fading attendance.

Locally, there are about a dozen clubs indulging in the turbid practice.

The mud phenomenon came to Southern California at Chippendale's.

Chippendale's, like other discos around town, began to suffer more than a year ago. The culprit: the fading of disco music and the tightening economy. People were just not going out as much.

Steve Banerjee, a native of India and Chippendale's operator, didn't wait long to take action. First came two nights a week of for-women-only male exotic dancers, a show in which the performers strip down to skimpy jock strap-type pouches.

That brought women in. Then early this year came female mud wrestling. That has been bringing the men in.

Banerjee first put together the mud wrestling show with Steve Hendrickson, a male exotic dancer who worked at the club. The two had read about it in a magazine that depicted females in Germany wrestling in mud for the enjoyment of men.

"We simply were looking for a way to draw more men in here on our off nights," said Banerjee, "but didn't want to do something tacky like a stripshow. I noticed that sex and violence sell on TV and in the movies. This is an extension of that but I try and create also an all-American atmosphere — beautiful girls, handsome waiters, stylish dress."

The women who wrestle are mainly moonlighting models, secretaries, schoolteachers, aspiring actresses. Banerjee pays them $100 for three 90-second rounds. Before bouts, they dance for the crowd in costumes ranging from nurse and stewardess to cowgirl and Princess Leia (from "Star Wars"), playing blatantly to male fantasies.

The women then slowly strip down to bikinis or dancing tights, all the while accepting monetary tips from the men in the audience in exchange for kisses.

At the end, the men bid for an opportunity to wrestle with one of the women. It can go as high as a few hundred dollars, usually the winning bid is about $50. One night recently a woman bid $350 and won a bout for her husband who was celebrating his 40th birthday.

"There is no blatant sex," Banerjee said, "just sexual fantasy. It's a problem, nevertheless, finding these ladies." His requirements are that they be "strong, at least 5-foot-6 and able to act."

The club is filled with college students in their 20s, young professionals in three-piece-suits and businessmen entertaining clients: "They come here, get real loose and it's easy to make a sale."

"Two girls wrestling is a male fantasy," Banerjee said. "I didn't like this kind of thing at first, but you become perverted in a sense. I'm into dancing, ballet and thought something like mud wrestling was beneath me. "But it's a commercial success."

Banerjee said he's planning a men's-only dance show in which the female performers would be doubles for celebrities like Ann-Margret or Farrah Fawcett. There would be, like the mud wrestling, no nudity.

Downstairs in the club, the shirtless waiters in black, skin-tight slacks, were milling along with smiling waitresses in sexy outfits acting friendly with the customers. The bar was dispensing vermouth cassis and Perrier as fast as orders could be filled, satisfying the two-drink minimum. The disco music roared incessant repeats of "Rocky's Theme."

In the center of the dance floor was a sandbox-sized wrestling ring filled with sponges soaked in theatrical mud (the kind that washes off easily). Seated around the pit in preferential viewing locations were 30 people, guests at a party for the man just turned 40.

Behind a railing, the crowd was six-deep. The fire inspectors strolled in to check things, but and stayed on for a while to have a drink and watch the show ringside.

The festivities began with a fashion show featuring fur coats. Someone from the back row yelled, "Into the mud!" It was to be an evening of catcalls.

Out came a master of ceremonies, Richard, a friendly sort who spewed one-liners and double-entendres. It was to be an evening of double-entendres. Said he, "It's a night of booze and ooze and the sublime and slime. And at the end, one lucky gentleman will be able to wrestle two lovely ladies in a tag team match and get down in the muck and yuck."

The first contestants: Out ran a woman named Magic dressed like a Girl Scout. "The original Girl Scout cookie," Richard said. "She's got merit badges you wouldn't believe."

Magic danced to the disco music; a man in the front row waved a $5 bill. She bumped and grinded over, dropped part of her outfit along the way and grabbed the bill. The man got a long, hard kiss. Eventually, the uniform was off and a white bikini remained.

Magic's opponent paraded out dressed as an Indian. Her name was Spread Eagle "from the tribe of Whoopee," informed Richard. She was wearing an Indian dress and her real name was Jill.

As she danced and undraped to a revealing bikini, Magic watched closely as if casting a spell.

Two referees — Ron and Marty — took their place. The women began the first round on their knees (a rule) and progressed to oozing around in a variety of holds. Their bodies turned brown, their hair caked with mud. It was a rough match, the women wrestling for real, the crowd reaction a near-deafening din.

At the end, the wrestlers climbed into a plastic bathtub. The referees poured water over their heads, rinsing them off. The crowd voted for the winner. It was Jill.

Jill Leatherbury is 21. She arrived in L.A. a few months ago from Shady Side, Md. She wants to be an actress ("I'm going to be a big star").

After the bout, she took time for a chat. "I've been wrestling for a couple of months," she said. "I'm an actress. I like center stage. I worked as a restaurant hostess but this is better.

"Each time I perform here I can come out dressed in a different kind of theme. It's fantasy, perhaps a sexual fantasy, something I normally wouldn't do.

"I like the mud. When you're little, you're not allowed to get muddy. Now we can and get paid for it. It's like making mud pies."

Ms. Leatherbury has a keen competitive instinct. "I'd never wrestled before this but have learned some moves," she said. "The half-nelson's my favorite. I like strong men. I've been able to beat up most of my boyfriends.

"You know, I think men like to see women together. That's how it is in all the sex-oriented magazines. I like to wrestle in the mud with men. It's sensuous and slimy and sleazy."

Gary Hendrickson, 32, a former male exotic dancer, is credited in part with bringing female mud wrestling to California.

"I created the whole thing as a promotional package," he said. "I know some people don't like it, a certain red-neck element, but it's a good source of entertainment. I'd rather go to a mud show than to the opera because the opera bores me.

"This is fun, kind of like playing in the rain. The mud adds an element of the forbidden the audience to get off on. It's a sensuous-type media."

Hendrickson and Banerjee had worked together on both the male exotic dancers show and the female mud wrestling. "We didn't get along business-wise," Hendrickson said. "I was the one who put the first show together and the one who wanted to oversee it and direct it. He didn't see it that way."

The idea for mud wrestling came to Hendrickson when he was performing as a male exotic dancer. "Herds of women were coming to see men," he said. "I wanted to think of something that brought out herds of men.

"It is indeed a combination of sex and violence — women rolling around in the mud is sexy; wrestling can be violent. The idea is to bring people out of their houses and show them something they won't see on TV, something they can talk about in the office the next day."

Hendrickson heads what is now a circuit of wrestling women most of whom have children and work the job as a second income. Among those are his 23-year-old girlfriend, Cheryl Edgar, with whom he has a daughter.

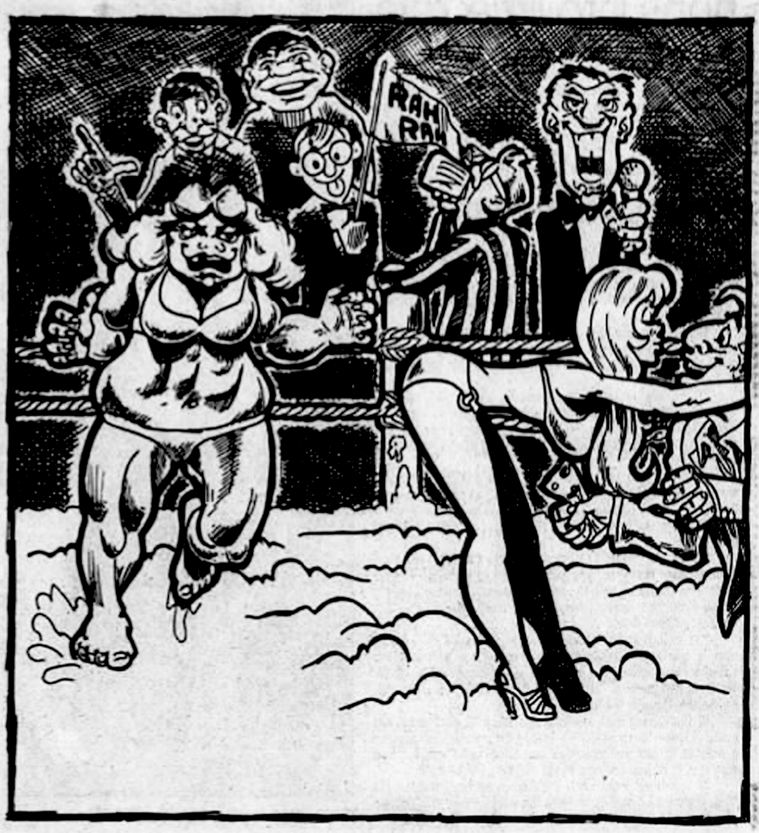
She is a star wrestler, a vivacious blonde who performs in a sexy Princess Leia costume and whose dance routines are brazen and seductive.

Hendrickson doesn't mind her wrestling. "It would be a double standard," he said. "I'm pretty liberal."

He takes the criticism of mud wrestling as "decadent and degrading" in stride: "There are a lot of ways of looking at entertainment," he said.

Much the same kind of action occurs Thursday nights over at Osko's. This is a spot that has served over the years a number of functions from private club to gay disco.

Now Don Miller, 37, runs it. Osko's also houses a restaurant and a weekend comedy club. It is more than twice the size of Chippendale's and this night attracted 100 fewer people to its female and wrestling show.



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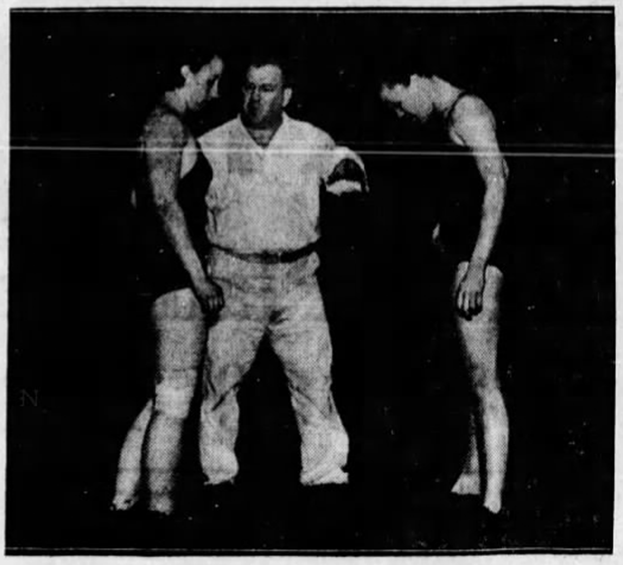
HERE'S MUD IN YOUR EYE---AND IN YOUR MOUTH, TOO

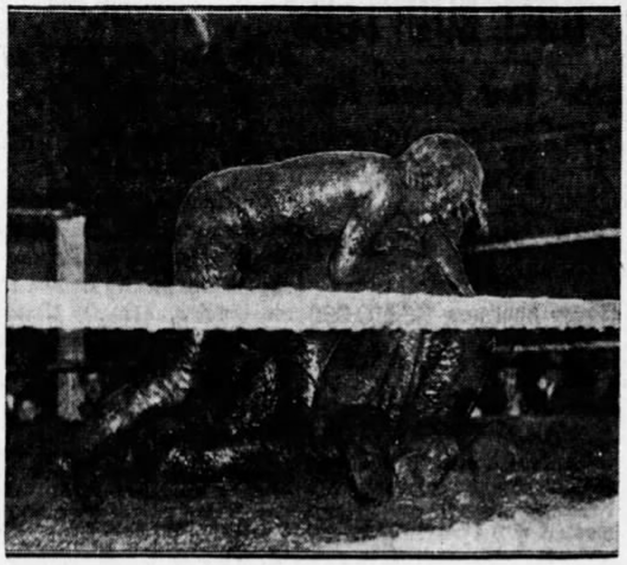
Glub, Glub! And Lady Grapplers Sink In Mire; Crowd Gets It, Too

Akron Offers World First Feminine Mud Bowl Rassle; Fans Roar

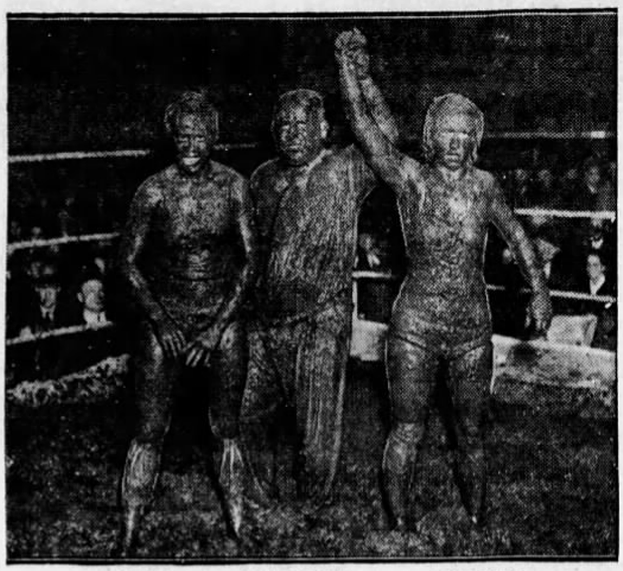
BABE **MILDRED**
. . . before the mud slinging began.



BABE **MILDRED**
. . . shake hands while still white.



. . . that's the referee on the bottom.



BABE **MADDOCK** **MILDRED**
. . . the dirty winnah!

By HELEN WATERHOUSE

REFEREE Ernie Maddock slithered across a square sea of mud in the ring at Akron armory last night to make a decision in the world's first feminine Mud Bowl wrestling match.

Suddenly his feet shot out from under him, and his 230 pounds of avoirdupois, encased in a lily-white uniform, hit the ooze.

"Glub, glub," spluttered Jerry the photographer, spitting out a large mouthful of perfectly good old canal-mud gathered from down by Louie Young's.

And he mournfully wiped black smear from his face, while he shielded his camera lens with one hand.

Ernie Throne For Champ

I opened one eye cautiously. The other was so caked with mud I couldn't see out of it. There on the stage sprawled Referee Maddock, with World Champion Mildred Burke sitting like a grotesque voodoo queen atop him. Somehow Ernie had managed to get entirely covered with the oily loam, with the exception of one very pink ear.

And as Ernie wallowed there, large gobs of rich muck, envy of any gardener, splashed right and left into the faces of ringsiders.

About this time, the business of getting in some of her favorite holds and at the same time trying to keep from sitting down in the four inches of mud, was fast getting the goat of Challenger Babe Gordon, tough, little 23-year-old Chicagoan.

Teetering on her bare toes, Babe managed to come through with a flying mare, but a minute later she was on top of Ernie and Mildred, her curly hair buried in the slime of the ring.

So They Throw The Mud

The whites of her eyes showed malevolently in her coal black face.

For 15 minutes and 20 seconds the two young women participants in the first world's feminine mud-bath wrestling match, splashed and sprawled.

As the match got well under way and their dander increased, they began to gather great handsful of the mud and slam it hither and yon and into each others faces, adding to Jerry's and my already mottled appearance. Their aim got poorer and poorer.

Moving picture cameras clicked, reporters and photographers gave up trying to guard their clothing from the onslaught. Screams of laughter rose from a thousand throats. There was a general scramble and ducking behind a barrage of newspapers, and blankets on the front rows.

Manager Bud Sommers of the Palace theater, down in the front ranks, begon to lose his trim pink and white appearance.

Pop Throws Mud

Ardent wrestling fan, Pop Mikolashak, got very excited and started to hunt some mud to sling, too. Little Phyllis McManigan and Bea Lane, two of the youngest fans, squatted down behind their seats to dodge the mud spray. They made mental notes on future mud fights with the kids at home.

Everyone had a mad and merry and muddy time.

Why the sight of three persons taking a mud bath, their hair caked, their bodies shining ebony, should be such an uproarious sight, I don't know, but it was.

As Champion Mildred said to me earlier—"The fad seems to be sweeping the country. No one knows how long it's going to last, but while it does, I'm going to do it, for there's good money in it."

And Promoter Carl Singleton explained how some canny western promoter had brought the idea over from India where similar mud wrestling bouts are held on a smaller scale.

Champion Mildred won the match with a body press finally, which means she sprawled over the recumbent Babe in the mud.

Keep Your Head Up

Afterwards Mildred, who has been wrestling professionally five years in more than 300 regular matches, said, "It was fun. The only thing wrong with it was getting mud in your eyes. I found the secret of that but too late. No matter what part of you falls first, keep your head up always."

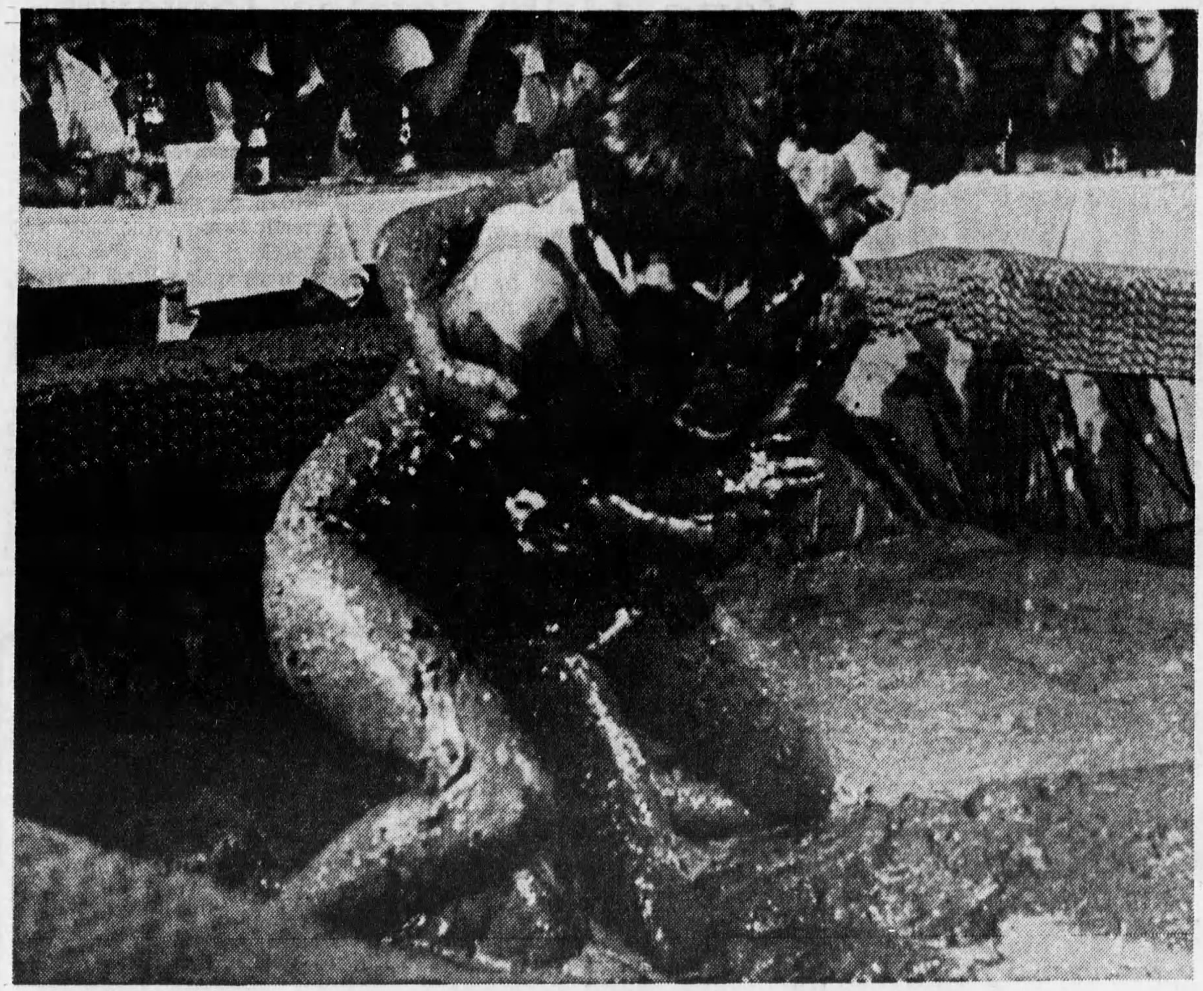
The disgusted Babe who continued to battle after her opponent had been declared winner, didn't agree with Mildred, however.

"It was no fun, I can tell you that," she sputtered.

On the way out, former Sheriff Jim Flower, shaking some stray mud blobs off his coat, said,

"Well, here's mud in your eye, anyway."

I spent the other half of the night trying to clean my green dress.



Here's mud in your eye

Cindy Geisler tries to get a hold on wrestling partner, Deborah Reuss, while male spectators cheer the gooey grappling, left. Mrs. Geisler, upper left, takes a break from women's mud-wrestling event at the Holiday House while Leslie Robshaw, upper right, prepares to plunge into mud pool to meet her opponent.

Post-Gazette photos by BILL LEVIS

The Chicago Knockers mud-wrestling team kept their minds and the minds of about 7,000 spectators off Monday's scorching weather during their performance at Clinton's Riverboat Days. (Times photos)

Weather, wrestlers rescue River Days

CLINTON — Hot and sunny weather lured an estimated 40,000 people to Riverboat Days Monday, pushing overall attendance at the four-day event over the 110,000 mark.

Rain dampened the river festival Friday and Saturday and kept attendance below 25,000 both days.

But attendance Monday received a boost when an estimated 7,000 people jammed into Riverview Stadium to see the Chicago Knockers, an all-woman mud wrestling act.

The 90-degree temeratures that bathed the Riverboat Days grounds Monday capped what festival organizers called "the best Riverboat Days ever."

"We had a huge crowd at the mud wrestling and this year was definitely better than last year," a festival spokesman said Monday night.

Fireworks Monday night topped off a weekend that included fun contests and tournaments, a queen pageant, battle of bands, helicopter and riverboat rides and shows of antique autos, horses and hotrods.

MUD WRESTLING CALLED 'OBNOXIOUS' IN DALLAS

DALLAS, Jan. 14 (AP)—Announcement of a "mud" wrestling match here next Tuesday night today provoked the following story in the Dallas Morning News:

"Barring interference by the state, Dallas next week will stoop tolerance of one of the most obnoxious forms of entertainment ever perpetrated for the public in the guise of sport when Promoter Bert Willoughby introduces mud wrestling.

"Playing the principal roles in his case will be Chief Little Beaver, the North Carolina Indian, and Opugar Toosa, who is billed by the impressario as India's champion mud grappler.

"They are slated for a finish joust to be carried out on a mat covered six inches in depth with slime. (Section 8, chapter 4 of the Texas rules and regulations governing wrestling reads in part: " . . . The mat and covering shall be clean and free from disagreeable odors at all times."

"The so-called sport of mud wrestling was introduced recently in Los Angeles, which, like New York, will go for almost anything.